

TO: Directors of schools  
FROM: Theresa Nicholls, assistant commissioner special populations  
DATE: August 9, 2017  
SUBJECT: **New Requirement for Alternative Assessments per ESSA**

### **Context**

The alternate assessments in Tennessee—TCAP-Alt for science and social studies and MSAA for ELA and math—are aligned with alternate academic achievement standards and are developed to ensure that **all students are able to participate in an assessment that is a measure of what they know and can do in relation to grade-level state standards**. The alternate assessment continues to be an appropriate assessment for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities, which is typically about one percent of the student population.

IEP teams must consider a student's individual characteristics when determining whether the student with a disability should participate in the general assessment with or without accommodations *or* in an alternate assessment. Districts and IEP teams should use the guidance found [here](#) to determine which students should be included in the alternate assessment because it is only appropriate for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

### **Implications of the Alternate Assessment**

Participation in the alternate assessment will limit student exposure to the depth and breadth of the general curriculum. **Also important to note, if a student participates in an alternate assessment, he or she will not obtain a general high school diploma.** Parents must be informed of the potential impact of alternate assessment participation to their child's educational options.

### **New Requirement Regarding Alternate Assessment per ESSA**

By law, the Tennessee Department of Education (the department) may not prohibit a school district from assessing more than one percent of its assessed students with an alternate assessment, provided the IEP team decision was made in good faith and the appropriate participation guidance was followed (Note: The guidance is hyperlinked above). **Now, under ESSA the department must require a school district that assesses more than one percent of its students with an alternate assessment in any subject to submit information justifying the need to exceed the one percent threshold.** The department must publicly post each justification, provided that it does not reveal personally identifiable information about an individual student. The department will review justifications and provide technical assistance to those district that submit a justification.

## **Next Steps**

To ensure that only students with the most significant cognitive disabilities take an alternative assessment, the department will take additional steps to support and provide oversight to each district that it anticipates will exceed the one percent threshold.

1. Each district must ensure that all students projected to participate in the alternate assessment have the correct assessment participation identified in EasyIEP.
2. The department will pull a report on Oct. 1 to identify school districts anticipated to exceed the one percent cap. Then, the department will use the following formula to calculate participation rate (*Note: English language arts and math participation rates must be calculated separately*).

$$\frac{\text{\# of MSAA Tested Students (ELA)}}{\text{\# of Students (All) Enrolled in District in Grades 3–8 and 11}} \times 100 = \text{Percentage of Students Participating in an Alternate Assessment}$$

3. The department will provide technical assistance to any district that is projected to exceed the one percent cap.
4. The department will monitor and regularly evaluate to ensure that all school districts projected to exceed the one percent cap provide sufficient training so that school staff members who participate on an IEP team implement the guidelines established by the department for participation in the alternate assessment (*Note: The guidance is hyperlinked on the previous page in the “Context” section*).
5. Then, districts that exceed the one percent cap—as calculated after the 2017-18 testing cycle—must submit a justification. This information will be made publicly available and posted to the department’s website. Information regarding the process to submit the justification will be provided to the identified school districts.

If you have questions regarding this process, please contact [Lori.Morris@tn.gov](mailto:Lori.Morris@tn.gov).